

SYMBOLISM IN ARCHITECTURE

CLEVER STUDY IN THE SCIENCE OF PRIMATIVE MAN.
ARCHITECTURE, MYSTICISM AND MYTH. W. R. LEATHAY. WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR. \$1.25. Macmillan & Co.

This extremely interesting volume aims to fill a place which has remained empty to the present time. It is peculiarly agreed among architects who have studied the history of their art that Mr. Herbert Spencer's essay on the origin of the styles of architecture is not satisfactory. Mr. Leathay's view is this: That one who carefully excludes, for the sake of impartial study, the discoveries of science and endeavors to think again the thoughts by which man at first sought to explain the visible world, will see that "progress of science is merely the framing and destruction one by one of a series of hypotheses; and that the early cosmogonies are one in kind with the widest generalizations of science—from certain appearances to frame a theory of explanation, from phenomena to generalize law." This is a generous and legitimate view to take of ancient interpretations of nature. Under the guidance of this principle he examines the origin of the temple as the representation of what the antique man supposed the universe to be like—sometimes as it was seen from the outside, for example in the Egyptian pyramids and Babylonian zigzags; sometimes from within as in the Egyptian and Greek temples and medieval churches; sometimes as a tree whose fruit was the stars shining like jewels. This temple was always supposed to be built upon the central point of the earth's surface, just as every tribe conceived its members to be as distinguished not from beasts but from all other human beings. It pointed upward to the central point of the firmament where the gods had their seats, and it was naturally placed with relation to the points of the compass or rather the points whence the winds blew. When the discovery was made that there were seven planets as distinguished from the fixed stars, and the theory was formed that these planets were fixed each in a sphere of its own, then the temple of a race like the old Babylonians, dedicated to the study of the heavens, was built in seven great steps, with the shrine of the deity at the top.

The analysis of the numismatic symbolism in this book is just sufficient to make one wish for more details and for more systematic treatment. How did the Celts of Ireland and the Norsemen come by their notions of the value of seven as a mystical number, while they had apparently no astronomical equivalent to the Babylonian seven? How came the ancient Mexicans to choose the number nine in place of seven? More eccentric than all the rest, how did the Japanese Shintoists come by the number eight, the symbolism of which hardly seems capable of a rational explanation? Perhaps no answer to such questions can be expected until the various sciences relating to primitive man have reached some broad grounds of agreement. Meanwhile is it at all certain that the ancient Chaldeans were conscious of mystical interpretations like those put upon their discoveries and inventions in later times? A common error is in one sense a symbol of the solar system. It might be made the centre for an elaborate scheme of myths, if the scientific age to which it belonged happened to be followed by many unscientific and superstitious generations, but no one to whom the machine is familiar thinks of it as anything more than an awkward device for initiating the motions of the planets. From the point of view of a people, to quote Mr. Husley, "quite as intelligent as we are and living in as high a state of civilization as that which had been attained in the greater part of Europe a few centuries ago," it might have seemed just the natural, practical thing to put the evidence of their scientific learning in a form as gigantic and as permanent as possible. Their successors, having lost the scientific impulse, would descend naturally to allegory, to a pretended wisdom which never had any existence. From such a corruption of what was at the outset very simple might flow that mysticism which in comparatively late times imagined pavements like the sea, ceilings like the sky; labyrinths as inexhaustible as the underworld, windows for every day in the year, candlesticks like jewel-bearing trees and pendant eggs, with all the fancies that could be developed from such objects.

Mr. Leathay suspects in himself a tendency to "overprove." Perhaps, but the reader will find more than one place where the author has been content with mere assertion in place of proof—for example, when he asserts in the face of Japanese philology that the shinto "jouji" (root of the sunbird) was a Buddhist loan. Such a statement should be demonstrated or it should not be made.

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